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How to Manage a Country Life Institute

By WARREN H. WILSON

TO manage well means to take care of all details. It takes a minister a long time to learn that something besides good ideas are needed. Excellent plans are dependent upon care of details for the outcome. Spiritual service is exercised in small particulars upon the perfection of which the whole enterprise depends. Jesus said about these things: "Ye shall be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."

Country Life Institutes are rural schools of religion. There is great need of them just now for the training of the religious people of a neighborhood in the doing of God's work. Social service can be carried on through leaders and followers, but only when the method of leadership and of obedience is perfectly worked out. There is a great demand, therefore, for community meetings, country church conferences, rural institutes and town schools of religion. A good many of those attempted fail. Success depends upon the way it is done. We have the ideas and the knowledge in hand. We have the speakers and the spirit, but these all fall short if certain things are neglected. The first of these is time. A school of religion for a community should be at least a day in length, preferably two days and in some instances a week. For such a continued impression a long time of preparation is necessary. Two months is not

too long a preparation for such a meeting. Advertising, a solicitation of helpers, securing of speakers, the fitting of parts together to make a whole, the enlisting of a solid expectation and the creating of an atmosphere in which people can learn, these all require a long period of time. The mind of the manager himself needs leisure in which to digest the enterprise in order that it may be perfectly assimilated by himself.

The money for such an enterprise must be secured beforehand. This is not hard to do in any community with leadership. Traveling expenses of from five to fifteen speakers are not heavy when one considers the total result attained. Such a country life institute, two days in length, has as much value to a community as a whole course of lectures, and people will subscribe cheerfully to that which dignifies the community. However, this money must be in the pocket of the treasurer before the speakers begin to arrive. Every speaker should be paid before he leaves the building on the day of his address. The treasurer should be in full command of his part of the conference and embarrassed by no lacking element in his job.

The place of such a meeting is important. It is useless to attempt to get country people into some towns or cities. "Not a good farmers' town" is a formula which has killed many an institute. The town being selected by its existing favor with country folk, the building itself is important. It is well for a central place to be found. Perhaps the sessions should be distributed between two buildings. It is a happy circumstance if such an institute have the use of a church of another denomination than that which leads in the enterprise.

The room in which a country church conference is held is an important detail. It should not be too

large nor too small, but it had better be too small than too large. Such a conference is a failure if attended by less than twenty people, but it needs no more than twenty to be a success; so that a church parlor is a better place than a church auditorium, unless the audience is so large as comfortably to fill the latter place. Then the atmosphere, the sounds from the street, the acoustic properties of the room, are all of importance.

Religious education is full of human nature, and human nature is hungry. A dinner should be served or a luncheon in the interval between sessions. It will forward the discussion of the theme far more than any other means could do. It will employ the women of the community in a sympathetic and happy way. It does not matter if this meal is served at a small charge. Its efficiency is just about the same as if it were free, but the breaking of bread together is a very ancient religious experience.

The manager of a school of religion for the neighborhood must take into account all the religious bodies of the neighborhood, so that religious co-operation is a detail not to be overlooked. In the minor parts of the program there are places for all the ministers of the community, at least for the significant selection of men who must be asked if the attention of all is desired. All doctrines of the present day pay tribute to the principle of religious federation. Everybody believes that the churches ought to get together. It is the aspiration of the common man when he thinks about God, so that the arrangements of such an institute must involve courteous tributes from one religious body to another and the discussion of interests common to all the churches.

Most vital of all, the institute must teach about God. Devotional meetings are a part of this. The words of some devout man are a part of it, but the

word of God in our day and generation is a word about human needs—the needs of poor people. If you want to teach God, you must teach some lessons about work, about poverty, about childhood, about the glorious hopes of youth, about sorrow and its comfort, about sin and its prevention, about sickness and its healing. The program that lacks these vital words on God's behalf will teach no religion, for it has none to tell.

The last detail and of most practical importance is that of presiding. Such a school of religion must depend on a person. It is in vain to appoint honorary presiding officers because they are prominent in the community or famous in the world. Such a meeting is a class room and one man must be the teacher. His qualities are expressed in rigid devotion to the program, sympathy with the audience and easy command over the speakers, and over those who shall discuss, and thorough knowledge of the subject itself.

There is plenty of knowledge and plenty of character and teaching ability in the colleges, seminaries and universities. Education needs to be broken up into bits and handed out to the hungry. It is in vain to teach the ministers a gospel of efficiency, if the officers of their churches are not taught the same lesson. The lessons of religious efficiency must be taught to the people in command in the small community, in order that neighborhoods may be built up in the love of God and of one another. The religion we need is to love God in our home town. That is to say, "To love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and to love thy neighbor as thyself." To teach people to do this is the business of the Country Life Institute.

Department of Church and Country Life, the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A., 156 Fifth Avenue, New York.





